SURINAME (Tier 2)

The Government of Suriname does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Suriname remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting more alleged traffickers and doing so for the first time since 2017, prosecuting three police officers for suspected complicity in trafficking crimes, identifying more victims, hiring additional officers for the Police Trafficking in Persons Unit (TIP Unit), implementing a formal victim identification and referral process, adopting a new National Action Plan (NAP), and expanding the interagency Trafficking in Persons Working Group (TIP Working Group). However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Authorities did not convict any traffickers, did not provide adequate services for victims, and did not sufficiently fund anti-trafficking efforts.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS: Increase efforts to convict traffickers, following due process, and sentence convicted traffickers to significant prison terms. * Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged traffickers, including officials complicit in trafficking crimes. * Provide vulnerable individuals with trauma-informed assistance, reintegration support, and interpretation in their language prior to, during, and after screening for trafficking. * Provide adequate and dedicated funding for the NAP and government departments carrying out anti-trafficking activities. * Prosecute child sex and labor trafficking cases under the trafficking statute and provide specialized child protection services with trained providers. * Fully implement the victim identification and referral protocol and train officials in its use to identify trafficking victims, especially among at-risk groups. * Train judges at all levels of the judiciary in human trafficking and the trafficking law and sensitize judges and prosecutors to the issue of secondary trauma. * Support NGOs and foreign embassies on victim identification and service provision. * Incorporate survivor input into anti-trafficking policies, develop and execute a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, and publish the results. * Refer to care victims identified through the hotline and report on the hotline’s effectiveness. *

PROSECUTION

The government increased prosecution efforts. Article 334 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of up to nine years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) ($5,120) for offenses involving a victim 16 years of age or older, and up to 12 years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 SRD ($5,120) for those involving a victim younger than the age of 16. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape.

Police initiated eight investigations (six for sex trafficking and two for labor trafficking), of 19 individuals, compared with six investigations (four for sex trafficking and two for labor trafficking) in 2020, eight investigations in 2019, and three in 2018. Police referred six cases and 17 defendants for prosecution, compared with one sex trafficking prosecution in 2020 that authorities later dropped due to insufficient evidence after the victim chose not to cooperate with the prosecution. Two cases involving four defendants were closed due to lack of evidence. The
government prosecuted seven individuals in five of the cases under the trafficking law and eight individuals in the sixth case under other laws. The prosecutions under the trafficking law were the first since 2017. Authorities prosecuted three police officers for suspected complicity in child sex trafficking. Authorities released eight alleged traffickers on bail while their trials were pending. In the previous reporting period, authorities prosecuted as other crimes two cases initially investigated for trafficking. The government reported one ongoing investigation against an offender still at large from the previous reporting period. In addition to the cases above, the TIP Unit investigated several other potential trafficking crimes involving Haitian migrants. The government did not convict any traffickers in 2021 or 2020, compared to 18 in 2019 and seven in 2018.

The TIP Unit was the sole agency responsible for the investigation of sex trafficking, forced labor, and migrant smuggling cases throughout the country. During the reporting period, the government appointed a new head and additional members of the TIP Unit. The TIP Unit reestablished interagency cooperation on trafficking investigations with the Military Police’s immigration office, the Alien Affairs Office, and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Police Youth Affairs Department also investigated any case involving persons younger than 18; the two units collaborated closely. The TIP Unit referred trafficking investigations to prosecutors trained in handling such cases. The anti-trafficking funding for these bodies was part of their overall budgets. The TIP Unit lacked sufficient funding and resources and some officers required further training on investigative techniques and victim identification. The TIP Unit adopted a strategic plan. As a result of the pandemic, the Maritime Authority, the military, the maritime police, and the Coast Guard increased inspections of vessels entering the country, to identify suspicious activities, including trafficking. In 2022, the TIP Unit began weekly patrols with the Maritime Police.

The pandemic significantly impacted the government’s efforts to coordinate, execute, and monitor its anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts for the second year. Numerous police officers including officers in the TIP Unit tested positive for the COVID-19 virus or had to quarantine, and several police stations closed due to lack of staff. The court system also shut down on several occasions, with some operations moving to digital platforms due to the pandemic; a large backlog of cases, including trafficking cases, continued despite the return to more normal operations by the end of the reporting period.

The government screened for trafficking crimes as part of an international operation that carried out targeted, coordinated enforcement actions against criminal migrant smuggling networks. The government signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with Brazil in January to improve cooperation against different transnational crime threats, including human trafficking. The TIP Unit collaborated with the Cuban embassy on a case involving Cuban nationals. The government also continued to collaborate on trafficking cases with neighboring Guyana and French Guiana. The government provided multiple in-person and online refresher courses on anti-trafficking enforcement, victim identification, and victim handling for members of the police, including the TIP Unit, and members of the Prosecutors’ Office. Other officials, including immigration officials and those from Alien Affairs and Social Affairs, did not receive trafficking training.
PROTECTION
The government increased protection efforts. The government identified 15 victims, compared with one victim in 2020 and three victims in 2019. Of the total victims identified, 11 women and two girls (eight Venezuelan and five Surinamese) were victims of sex trafficking and two People’s Republic of China (PRC) national men were victims of labor trafficking. The government identified two of the 15 victims at illegally-operated commercial sex establishments. The government referred all victims to government-funded non-shelter services and two of the Venezuelan victims to the two open shelter spaces in the TIP Unit office building; the others stayed in places they deemed safe and checked in with the police. The TIP Working Group’s constituent agencies fully implemented the First Response to the Victim of Trafficking in Persons Protocol, resulting in increased efforts to identify victims among constituent agencies. The Protocol outlined procedures for interacting with potential trafficking victims, the process from identification to providing essential services, and the rights of victims. The government reported police and immigration officials screened at-risk populations, including migrants and those in commercial sex, for trafficking. The TIP Unit and the Military Police, in charge of immigration services, agreed to reintroduce trafficking screening by the TIP Unit on incoming international flights instead of by members of the immigration services only; the TIP Unit began to do so daily in January 2022. The government reported the last Cuban medical workers departed the country in September 2021. The government reported it did not screen Cuban medical workers for trafficking indicators.

No NGOs in the country specifically worked on human trafficking, although an international organization and other NGOs included trafficking victim protection in their activities. The Ministry of Justice and Police used a process by which they referred victims to the Bureau of Victim Services for food, shelter, medical care, counseling, and other care funded out of its regular budget. The government continued to make available basic services despite the pandemic and offered them to foreign and national victims and those with disabilities. The government also gave victims basic personal protective equipment due to the pandemic. The Bureau of Legal Aid could provide victims with legal assistance, if necessary. Under the new protocol, officials offered these services to potential victims upon first encounter with them. Government agencies did not have victim assistance funds specifically allocated but made resources available as needed from the general budget. The government did not place time limits or conditions upon services, except for the government shelter, which could be used for up to three months; authorities did not require victim cooperation with law enforcement in order to receive care. The government funded and operated a trafficking shelter for women and children; it was in the same complex as a shelter for domestic violence victims. The trafficking shelter was normally the only facility the government had available for human trafficking victims; it was closed for part of the reporting period due to pandemic-related staffing shortages and complete renovation of the buildings. However, the TIP Unit provided two victims with accommodations within its own office building, which was originally a home, when the shelter was closed. There were no specialized shelter services for child or adult male trafficking victims. Children who did not want to return to their homes had the option of entering a childcare facility or staying with a foster family. Special counseling was available for child victims along with their families. All victims were free to leave the shelter, but only with a chaperone. Due to a lack of adequate shelter services, the TIP Unit also allowed victims who had a safe place to stay to remain out of shelter; however, authorities required the victims to periodically check in with the police. The
government reported being willing to assist foreign victims to apply for temporary or permanent residency and a work permit, but there were no longer term shelter options available for foreign victims. Victims could apply for temporary or permanent residency whether or not they assisted with trials, although there were no reported cases of victims using either of these provisions. Victim-witnesses could move freely within the country or travel abroad. If a victim returned to the country after leaving, the victim would be under the same conditions as other travelers to the country; the government did not offer victims a special category of visa. There was no witness protection program, although victims in shelters received police protection. Authorities provided counseling and legal support to victims in judicial processes and strongly encouraged victims to participate; courts could obtain testimony from victims in the early stages of judicial investigations in cases where victims were not available during the trial process, although this could weaken testimony. Victims could speak directly to a counselor or a member of the Prosecutors’ Office instead of to the police. In the case of foreign victims, prosecutors usually used a victim’s initial report as a formal criminal complaint and testimony in the case, as victims often returned to their countries of origin before a trial was completed; in almost all cases courts lost contact with the victim once the victim departed the country. Victims could refuse to have their initial report used in this way, but observers noted there were no reports of this. However, victims continued to have the right to testify after providing an initial statement and/or after receiving counseling. The defense attorney also continued to have the right to question the victim. Testimony via video or written statements was possible. Victims had the right to seek compensation through a civil process, though no such case has ever been filed.

Observers noted that gaps in government policies and regulations, as well as a lack of oversight and implementation, enabled traffickers to exploit victims. The government did not report deporting any victims. The government failed to effectively repatriate victims; outside observers noted, given limited flights out of the country due to the pandemic, in most cases victims who opted to leave did so through their own mechanisms. The government reported it did not knowingly detain, fine, or jail potential trafficking victims for unlawful acts their traffickers forced them to commit. However, in previous reporting periods, outside organizations reported the government jailed human trafficking victims under the Alien Act for having been in the country illegally after being referred to the TIP Unit for assistance. The government reported it coordinated with the Cuban embassy and the Maduro regime in Venezuela on victim support after it identified victims from these countries. Outside observers reported the process for collaboration between the TIP Unit and embassies on victim support was cumbersome and bureaucratic, impacting the response time of embassies to provide essential support to their citizens.

PREVENTION
The government increased prevention efforts. The government adopted a new annual NAP for 2021-2022. The TIP Working Group was the primary interdepartmental group responsible for monitoring and implementing the NAP, coordinating government efforts to combat trafficking, and making recommendations to the government, including on legislation. The TIP Working Group, coordinated by the Director of Operations of the Ministry of Justice and Police, reported to the Minister of Justice and Police on the activities of the NAP and addressed emerging issues on a whole of government basis. Alien Affairs and Human Rights, which provide victim
services, joined the TIP Working Group during the reporting period. Observers reported the TIP Working Group resolved issues that impacted the execution of policy related to human trafficking, including approving budgets and action plans; communicating across the interagency, including ministries not part of the Working Group such as the Ministry of Health; identifying resources; and collecting data from the Prosecutors’ Office and the Court of Justice. A core group within the Working Group was also responsible for day-to-day issues that required immediate higher-level attention, as this core group had direct contact with the Minister of Justice and Police. The Director of Operations of the Ministry of Justice and Police chaired the Working Group. The TIP Working Group met in whole and in part several times during the reporting period. The TIP Working Group’s mandate was renewed in November 2021 for one year. The government did not seek input from survivors or NGOs in drafting the annual NAP or for other laws or policies; the government did incorporate input from international organizations. The government did not allocate funding specifically for human trafficking included in the NAP; funding for such activities came from the overall budgets of the respective agencies, with the Ministry of Justice and Police undertaking the most activities. The government implemented anti-trafficking activities with available non-reallocated funding from the Ministry of Finance; lack of sufficient funding due to generally low funds, budget deficit restrictions, and the pandemic significantly impacted the ability of the TIP Working Group to implement the activities included in the NAP. The government reported low-cost activities and those in advanced stages of implementation progressed; for example, the full implementation of the First Response to Victims of Trafficking Protocol progressed, after having been delayed during the previous reporting period due to the pandemic.

The government continued to operate a 24-hour anti-trafficking hotline in the interagency National Command Center. The hotline primarily operated in Dutch, English, and Sranan Tongo. The government did not keep statistics on calls or victims identified through the hotline. The government made informational flyers and brochures in different languages with the anti-trafficking hotline number and posted the flyers at multiple entry points into the country, police stations, doctors’ offices, and other locations. One member of the TIP Working Group presented to the PRC Embassy and the PRC national community on labor trafficking. The government halted other awareness campaign activities, particularly in schools, because of the pandemic. The government did not conduct formal research on trafficking during the reporting period. The TIP Unit, along with the Youth and Morals Division, polled visitors to police stations on their awareness of human trafficking; the TIP Unit used the poll results to inform its workplan and website. The government partnered with a university on a course on trafficking to raise awareness among students and spur interest in research. The government did not publicly post an assessment of its anti-trafficking efforts but made the information available upon request.

Labor laws prohibited employers, recruiters, and labor agents from charging workers recruitment fees, confiscating workers’ passports or travel documents, switching contracts without workers’ consent, or withholding wages as a means of keeping workers in a state of compelled service. Labor laws required all employment agencies to be licensed before recruiting either national or foreign employees, and they had to receive permission from the Ministry of Labor before entering into work mediation with employees. The government reported the Labor Inspectorate regularly checked the paperwork of foreign workers, who were vulnerable to labor trafficking, at job sites and fined employers for violations; half of inspectors received training on child
trafficking in previous reporting periods. The government assigned the Labor Inspectorate as the lead agency responsible for overseeing the implementation of pandemic protocols in different business sectors, which significantly increased its reach to conduct regular inspections, although the government did not provide sufficient funding, staffing, or equipment to cover all tasks. Most inspections were unannounced, but the law did not allow labor inspectors to inspect private homes or farms, and police had to be escorted and have a special warrant for any inspections on private property. The government reported fining businesses up to 250 SRD ($12.80) for each foreign worker employed without having the proper registration paperwork. Labor inspectors also screened for trafficking indicators but did not report identifying any labor trafficking cases through such measures during its increased inspections during the reporting period. No inspectors were solely dedicated to child labor, but the government trained all inspectors to identify child labor and instructed them how to handle suspected cases. The government warned businesses against hiring foreign workers without proper documentation and provided information on employment scams and fraudulent job offerings to businesses and workers through print, social media, and on television, including public service announcements with contact information for questions or concerns. Authorities also could accept information on labor violations reported by the public. Authorities, including the TIP Unit, suspended all flights to and from Haiti during the reporting period following concerns about the vulnerability of Haitians to trafficking and questions about the legality of Haitians’ paperwork to enter the country, as well as concerns over possible onward destinations. Limited unemployment benefits only went to citizens. The TIP Working Group trained newly appointed diplomats on human trafficking. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not make efforts to reduce participation in international and domestic child sex tourism.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE: As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Suriname, and traffickers exploit victims from Suriname abroad. Reported cases of trafficking in Suriname’s remote jungle interior, which constitutes approximately 80 percent of the country, have increased in recent years; limited government presence in the interior renders the full scope of the problem unknown. Weak immigration policies, difficulty in controlling Suriname’s borders, and the draw of the gold and timber trade have led to an influx of immigrants from different countries entering Suriname legally and remaining in country after their legal stay expires. These persons become particularly vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking. Traffickers target the increasing influx of migrants into Suriname, particularly those from Haiti and Venezuela, as well as those from Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Guyana. Migrant women and girls are especially at risk for sex trafficking in Suriname, including in brothels, massage parlors and hair salons, and illegal gold mining camps in Suriname’s interior. Individuals involved in commercial sex offered through newspaper ads and social media are also at risk for trafficking. Adult and child migrant workers in agriculture, retail shops, construction, and on fishing boats off Suriname’s coast are at risk of trafficking, as are children working in agriculture, small construction, gold mines, and informal urban sectors. Given their irregular status, migrant groups avoid seeking assistance from the authorities for fear of criminalization or deportation, making them vulnerable to traffickers. In March 2020, authorities signed an agreement with the Cuban government to allow 120 Cuban medical workers to help combat the pandemic; 51 Cubans came to the country during the previous reporting period, joining approximately 50 already in the country. Cuban medical workers may
have been forced to work by the Cuban government prior to their departure. PRC national-run associations, and allegedly some Hong Kong traffickers, recruit and exploit PRC national immigrants in sex and labor trafficking in the mining, service, and construction sectors. Surinamese women in neighboring countries are at risk of sex trafficking. Some Surinamese parents exploit their daughters in sex trafficking, a trend exacerbated by the pandemic. Traffickers may transport victims through routes in Suriname’s interior that bypass official checkpoints. There are reports of corruption and local official complicity in trafficking crimes that may impede anti-trafficking efforts. While traffickers are predominantly male, authorities have also prosecuted and convicted women who trafficked individuals. Traffickers may exploit victims from the same migrant populations. In previous reporting periods, authorities could deport at-risk-individuals who violated the terms of their stay before being screened for trafficking, but in the previous reporting period the government reported it stopped all deportations as part of its pandemic response measures unless the deportation involved persons suspected of committing a crime apart from having an irregular status. Trafficking across the eastern, western, and southern borders remained possible despite pandemic-related border closures. The pandemic exacerbated trafficking risks after the government shut down clubs and brothels in April 2020 and individuals engaged in commercial sex began to do so online, in private homes, or in more poorly protected clubs in the interior, making them vulnerable to trafficking. Organizations representing the HIV positive and LGBTQI+ communities also reported that these groups became particularly at risk as they faced increased poverty due to the pandemic. The pandemic also increased the risk for lower-skilled individuals unable to find work.